



Collaboration helps combat poverty

By Senator Carol Liu and Kelly Lilles

August 13, 2012

This country's recession has taken a toll on many Californians. Five years into the recession, the new faces of poverty belong to people who once lived relatively stable, middle-class lives and now struggle to eat, find shelter, and provide for their children.

The ranks of California's homeless have swelled with people living on the couches of friends, multiple families crowding into single-family homes, shelters filled to capacity, and a growing number of homeless encampments scattered along river banks and under freeway passes.

Nearly one in five homeless Americans lives in California, and one quarter of the state's population lives in poverty.

Fresno County was particularly hard hit. In 2010, Fresno County had the state's highest poverty rate, at 26.8%. Nearly 250,000 of the county's residents are living in poverty, nearly 70,000 more than in 2007, according to U.S. Census data published last year in the Fresno Bee.

One quarter of Fresno city residents are below the poverty level, compared to 13.7% statewide. Equally alarming is that 3 in 10 children and teens under the age of 18 live in poverty – nearly twice the state's average of 17.7%.

The effects on children living in poverty, even for a short period of time, are long-lasting. Study after study has documented poorer cognitive functioning, lower academic achievement, poorer physical health, and more hospitalizations as consequences of poverty for child development.

Sadly, there is no end in sight. Recently released data show that the country will continue to see needs grow, as the gains from the war on poverty are erased by a fraying safety net and slowly recovering economy. But there are some rays of hope and examples of what can be done locally to ease the pain and put people back on track to leading healthy and productive lives.

Over the past two years, it has become common in Fresno and elsewhere in California to see well-educated, middle-class parents who have been laid off and are unable to find work seek help from community organizations like Catholic Charities of Fresno. Often the assistance they need is not long-term. With the donation of a single month's rent, one client was able to bridge from joblessness and the brink of homelessness, to a new job and steady paycheck.

The average number of times families receive food assistance from Catholic Charities is three times a year – enough to help bridge difficult transitions.

This week, state and community leaders are embarking on a “Road to Resilience Tour,” and visiting key communities in the state to see the effects of the recession on older adults and families, and to look at what promise lies in community services provided locally.

In Fresno, the collaboration among organizations has grown organically as the recession has worsened. In the past two years, organizations have pulled together to collect and distribute food and other items to meet a wider range of needs across a range of service providers.

For example, when the food bank receives excess donations, it donates them directly to member organizations like Catholic Charities or the Fresno Rescue Mission.

Schools have jumped in by collecting donations for homeless packs to be distributed by Catholic Charities and other community organizations. Especially popular are toothbrushes, soap and other hygiene items.

The Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission made partnerships a strategic priority as the economy lagged, and began working closely with agencies that compliment their efforts to reduce homelessness, including Fresno City College, behavioral health professionals, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and others.

As the state’s economic woes have deepened, policy makers, service providers, and advocates are challenged to be creative in the ways they assist those in need.

Helping families find a pathway out of poverty will take ingenuity, commitment, and an unprecedented coordination of effort. The type of local collaboration we are seeing in Fresno enriches this community and offers the best hope for success.

Carol Liu is chair of the Senate Human Services Committee. She represents Senate District 21. Kelly Lilles is the Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Fresno.